

Sample Essay

As the British North American colonies developed during the first half of the eighteenth century, how did they at once retain identity as Britons and as Americans? Explain how the colonists at once retained British cultural traits and developed new ones.

As the British colonies in North America matured in the 1700's, they developed into societies that, in some ways, grew to more closely resemble that of England, and in other ways, became unique unto themselves. Above all, the majority of colonists still thought of themselves as British subjects, and as the colonies stabilized and grew in terms of population and wealth, these colonists were able to pursue a life like that of their cousins across the Atlantic. At the same time, however, they developed their own ideas, customs, and identities.

One of the driving factors behind the development of the identity of the colonies was their increased wealth. The prosperous industries of the colonies provided their people with a way of life different than that of the first settlers of British North America. Their concerns were no longer with mere survival or establishing lasting settlements, as they had been a century before. The development of their successful economies distributed wealth in different patterns than were found in Europe and in England in particular. While there was no doubt a stratification of economic classes in the colonies, the middle class that developed was considerably larger than was England's. This meant a greater portion of the population had the means to fashion a life to meet their ideals, which, overall, was the replication of those well-to-do English. In cities and towns across the colonies, the Americans fashioned themselves and their homes according to English styles. The architecture of the day is a testament to their English identity.

While most of the economy of the colonies was still firmly based in agriculture, colonists did begin to manufacture some of their own goods to meet the demand for English-style comforts. Other signs of a "developed" society like England began to appear as well, such as newspapers and libraries. Those colonists who had more time on their hands because of increased wealth were able to turn their attention to more academic matters, as was demonstrated by a newfound interest in the colonies in science and medicine. Indeed, because of the work of some colonists in these fields, the English

scientific community began to see itself as inclusive of those in the colonies, shown by their acceptance of Benjamin Franklin and others in their Royal Society.

Other ideas of the Enlightenment were transported across the Atlantic to the colonies as well, especially those in political philosophy. The governments of the colonies grew to closely resemble that of post-Glorious Revolution England, with a pronounced emphasis on the role of an elected body. While royally-appointed governors, like the King of England, still retained much of their power, the idea that those in power were in some way responsible to the general population (or, at least, to white men) had taken hold, perhaps even more so in the colonies than in England.

This identity of the colonists as English was further galvanized by their increased self-perception as Protestants, aided in part by wars with Catholic France and Spain. As the colonists fought on the side of the British against those Catholic enemies, this identity became stronger. Also, while the settlers of years past had brought with them a sectarian view of their own Protestant sects, the Great Awakening helped blur many of those previous distinctions. The colonists were, generally speaking, now of one English Protestant ethic, though not attached specifically to the Church of England.

One important development that distinguished the culture emerging in the colonies from that of England was that factor driving much of the increased wealth of the colonies: slavery. Especially in the southern colonies, but also, to a lesser extent, in the northern ones, the enslavement of blacks had become an established way of life. In the southern colonies with their plantation economies, it would not be too much to say that the prevailing structure of society was slave-based. While the notion of a forced laboring class was not new to England with its history of indentured servitude, the slavery of blacks in the colonies embedded the idea of racial difference into the society. This development, in particular, helped forge the identity of the colonies as a different version of that of England.